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## THE CONFERENCE HOUR IN THE PITTSBURGH HIGH SCHOOLS

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The first-year pupils of the Pittsburgh high schools formerly had English (4),<sup>1</sup> algebra (4), ancient history (3), botany (3), and Latin (4) or German (4). Last year ancient history was taken out and a course in elementary science substituted for botany. The three hours formerly given to ancient history were divided among English, algebra, and Latin or German, one period to each.

The essential difference between this and the remaining four periods consists in the one restriction that no assignment of lessons is to be made, no preparation required of the pupils. One night in the week—the night before this special lesson—the pupils are to be relieved of this one study and to feel free to devote their entire time to other branches.

But while the assignment or non-assignment of work is the original difference, a more important one has arisen, due to the possible methods of disposing of this period. In consequence, it has been variously called the conducted-study period, the conference period, and the unassigned-lesson period.

The purpose of this period is threefold: first, to relieve the pupils in the first year from the severe pressure caused by a too heavy schedule, and to enable them to strengthen the courses which they do carry; second, to enable the teacher, by a judicious investment of this free time at his disposal, to inculcate at the beginning right habits of thinking, to develop proper methods of attacking a new topic, and to secure careful and accurate reviews of previously acquired knowledge; third, to afford opportunity for special and individual help in the case of pupils, naturally weak or temporarily disabled through absence or sickness, who need a greater amount of attention than the average of the class.

<sup>1</sup> The numerals in parentheses indicate the number of recitations a week.

The various uses to which the period has been put are not unique in themselves, nor are the methods employed at that time such as would be impossible or inadvisable for other periods. The main point is that the whole period may, week after week, be devoted to that feature or to those features of the work which in the judgment of the teacher will be most helpful to the class.

This new schedule for the first year became operative in September, 1910. After several months' trial all teachers of first-year subjects met to report upon this conference period and to discuss as fully as possible methods and results. Before coming to the meeting each teacher wrote out his experience with the new plan and gave some of the ways in which he had used it. A teacher of each subject was appointed to make a compilation of the uses the different teachers had made of this period. From these reports detailed illustrations may be taken of the different ways in which the conference period has been used.

Perhaps the most obvious use for such a period is for the review of past work. Several departments used the conference period for this purpose. Among these is the Latin department, which uses a device described in the following terms:

If we have been studying lessons with long or difficult vocabularies, or when the study of a conjugation or a declension has been completed, we have a vocabulary match. We give the nominative, genitive, and gender of the nouns, principal parts and synopses of verbs, type and comparison of adjectives, and formation and comparison of adverbs. These matches are conducted in two ways, either by "spelling down," or by "jumping" and then at the end of the period numbering for the next trial. A pupil who stays head two days in succession is on the honor roll and goes to the foot to start up in line again.

We frequently have sentences on the different constructions of the previous week, and after a great many sentences have been given by the teacher, as quickly as possible, each student is asked to make a good English sentence using only words and constructions that can be translated into Latin by the class. One student is asked to read his sentence and another to translate it, if it is a good sentence. If it is a good sentence containing forms unknown to the class, the reader is asked to translate it. At other times the sentences are put on the board for the whole class to translate, and then the work is corrected. The classes have also written original Latin compositions. The sentences were, of course, of the first- and second-reader class, but the classes seemed to enjoy the work, and received a little benefit therefrom.

The German department conducts reviews by returning corrected test-papers and making them the basis of discussion. The following description shows the way these papers are discussed:

I return a test on the subject of prepositions and modal auxiliaries, the work of six weeks. All mistakes have been marked on the paper. I call on a pupil to translate "for whom." If he says *für wem* I ask him to give the list of prepositions which govern the accusative, and also the declension of *wer*; then he corrects his mistake. I call on another pupil to translate "with whom," "against whom," and then "for what," "with what," and "against what." The next phrase, "from it," leads to a discussion and drill on such forms as *dafür*, *davon*, and *daraus*. The third word, *meineswillen*, leads to a review of the personal pronouns, and a drill on the use of a noun preceding the preposition.

In algebra also a similar method is followed.

The second general use to which the conference period is put is the preparation for future work. Under this head the report of the Latin department describes its work as follows:

We have used the additional period chiefly to break new ground. By this I mean we reserve this lesson chiefly for the development of a new topic, for practice in sight-work in translating, or for analysis of advance English sentences. In other words, it is chiefly preparatory in nature. Any necessary memory work, on which such development is based, is arranged for on the previous days. Then, when the class is assembled, we examine and lay out our course for the following lesson or lessons during the week. From one-third to one-half the first-year work in Latin consists of such advance explanation, so that we have been able to use this period advantageously in this way. The recitation is usually by volunteers, and, though no record of marks is kept as on other days, the pupils are quite as ready and interested as with their assigned work.

To be more specific, in vocabulary work we often take up a new vocabulary and read it over, separating stems from endings, and deciding to what declension or conjugation each word belongs and why. When that is decided, we name the model word like which it should be inflected, and mention any irregularity in the inflection. Following this we sometimes decline or conjugate it to fix the forms more surely in mind. After reading a new vocabulary in this way, we translate new sentences containing these words, using the vocabulary freely for reference.

In considering Latin sentences we generally read at sight, calling on anyone to supply forgotten words, phrasing, and pointing out relations indicated by endings. In case of hesitation, guidance is furnished by calling attention to the most important clues to the meaning: the subject, the verb, the object, and the division of the sentence into clauses, as shown by the introductory word

and the verb, or the division into phrases, indicated by a preposition and its object or by two or more words in agreement. Time is saved, and a better chance is given to slow pupils, in this work, if the sentences are assigned and a minute or two given for their preparation, without reference to notes or vocabulary, so that the recitation is prompt. Sometimes we read a short anecdote from the Latin. Each student is given one word for which he is responsible; a moment is given for preparation, so that the new words may be found in the vocabulary and the construction decided upon. Then the story is read in English, each student contributing his word. This keeps the pupils thinking, for no one wishes to break the chain. One week one of the boys brought to the class an original anecdote, entitled "Caesar in London in 1910."

The German department presents new work during this period in the following manner:

When it has been possible, I have given examples involving the grammatical principle and then have had the pupils deduce the rule. For example, when the lesson was on prepositions governing the genitive, I wrote upon the board several illustrative sentences, and the pupils with little explanation readily saw that such prepositions governed that case. Then, after the presentation, I gave a definite time for study, during which I required the pupils to learn all the prepositions governing the genitive and to use them in sentences. Then a short recitation followed, which for the most part was spontaneous and enthusiastic, owing, I think, to the supervised study.

A teacher of English describes the preparation for future work thus:

All my study periods in English have been used in guiding or leading the pupils into a careful preparation of the next day's lesson. With our textbooks open we explore together the new field of work for the following day.

The preparation for new work is very closely allied to what is perhaps the most important use to which such a period as this may be put, namely, supervision of the study of the pupils and attention to their individual needs.

In the German department the teachers without exception have laid special emphasis on the supervision of the pupils' methods of studying. One teacher writes:

"I have had the pupils study, and I have tried to correct their methods of studying. Personally, I feel that the correct method is so different with different minds that the only way to help a pupil is to watch him and then make suggestions for a change. Too many pupils depend on memory and then memorize in poor ways. Even in language the reasoning power should be used. One or two poor pupils have improved their memorizing power by being

required to write their rules, thus joining their eye and motor-muscle impressions to their ear impression. I have tried to have every German study period—typical of how the pupils should study at home.”

Another teacher, in training pupils to right habits of study, lays stress upon concentration. The first half of the extra period is to be used as a study period. The teacher assigns a definite amount which he knows can be prepared in a given time. Absolute concentration upon this particular portion of the lesson, along lines which are at first indicated, is insisted upon. The other portion of the study period is then given over to recitation upon the subject just studied. In this way the teacher is in a position to know which pupils must be taught how to study if any results are to be obtained.

A second point kept prominently in mind is the necessity of teaching children how to attack a lesson. The *modus operandi* differs with the teacher and the class. Instruction—direct and by example and suggestion—has been tried. All of the teachers seem to have found the presentation of a new lesson during this special period exceedingly helpful.

The report of the teachers of algebra says:

Occasionally it has seemed best to use the period in taking up new work, in tracing the development of a principle, or in discussing its application. In this manner much good can be done for the pupils by teaching them *how* to study. This is particularly true in concrete problems where ability to analyze and interpret given conditions and relations is of fundamental importance.

The period has often been spent in giving individual instruction to pupils who, from absence, lack of application, or inability, have fallen behind the class. Pupils have frequently requested an explanation of some particular difficulty at this conference period. Sometimes an important type-problem has been given to the whole class for solution at the beginning of the period, and the remainder of the time has been used in clearing up difficulties which have been encountered in its solution. It sometimes happens that explanations can be made advantageously to a group of pupils rather than to individuals. In any case, while the slower pupils are being helped, the better pupils are kept busy at some supplementary work.

A teacher of English gives the following illustration of the training in study which may be given in such a period as this:

“The methods of teaching the pupils how to study vary necessarily with the nature of the lesson to be prepared. Let me give a concrete example: When we take up the study of clearness, I ask all the class to read the first paragraph on the subject, selecting one pupil to read aloud while the others listen. At the close of the reading I have several pupils tell me what they consider the most important points of the paragraph—those points which explain the quality called clearness.

“By pointing out and discussing the leading thoughts of the paragraph, the

pupils learn to discriminate between the more important and the less important points. They learn that much can be gained from even one reading, and that their lessons may be prepared more quickly when they really master the thoughts of the printed page. Thus we spend an entire period discussing the subject in hand, and it is very interesting to see each pupil's mind trying to compete with the other minds in quickness of grasp. The pupils often see the lack of clearness in their own sentences when talking. We are never able to cover the entire lesson assigned for the next day, but the pupils have gone far enough on the way to see the end ahead. With the three essentials, attention, interest, and industry, a study period in English may be made a powerful factor in the development of a pupil's mind."

In explaining a conference lesson on American literature another teacher writes:

"With the books open on our desks we begin an outline as a preparation for study. 'American Literature' is taken as the title of the entire outline, and the subject of the first chapter as the first large topic. Taking the chapter, paragraph by paragraph, we give the topics, using them either as topics or sub-topics according to the importance of the contents.

"After much discussion, we decide that the idea of the first paragraph is 'the origin of literature.' From individual suggestions we draw the conclusion that 'the meaning of literature' is the next point. This brings us to the idea of 'English literature,' discussed under the heads: (1) characteristics, (2) growth, (3) divisions. The final topic of the chapter becomes 'causes for difference in British and American literature.' Under each one of these topics are subtopics. The discovery of the important heads is what the pupil finds most difficult. If we can show him how to decide upon these, and how to attach to them, as minor details, the other ideas of the chapter, we have shown him how to study."

The individual needs of the pupils are sometimes met by the Latin department by dividing the classes.

Sometimes the classes are divided into two sections, those above 65 per cent forming one section, those below, the other. Section I is given lists of sentences previously prepared to be translated into Latin or English, while the pupils of the other section are being drilled on the paradigms and principles of syntax. The last part of the period is spent by the class in reviewing the work of the first section.

This conference period also offers opportunity for emphasis on certain aspects of the work for which there is little time in the regular periods. One German teacher writes:

Training in the pronunciation of German and practice in expressing thought in it are two tasks which are not only the most difficult ones which confront the teacher of German, but also the most important if the study of the language

is to be of use to the pupil. The conference period offers an excellent opportunity for such training. There are many possible methods. Sometimes I read aloud an anecdote taken from the textbook, or from some other book, and have the pupils translate from hearing. Sometimes I give an account of something connected with the lesson; for example, the life of Helen Keller proved interesting on the day the pupils added to their vocabulary the words "blind," "deaf," and "dumb." Sometimes I ask the pupils to describe what they see in the schoolroom or from the schoolroom window. I teach the new word by writing it on the board and explaining the meaning, either by gesture or by familiar German words, rarely by the use of a dictionary. Often a pupil who has difficulty in learning from the printed page excels in the oral work.

The success of the conference hour is largely due to the spirit of co-operation which pervades it. In the words of the representative of the Latin department:

The work of the conference period often differs but little from that done at other periods; but we feel that unless the work is to some extent a pleasure a part of its value is lost, and that variety is likely to add to the interest. We have tried to enliven our uninteresting textbook somewhat by telling or reading a little about the Romans, their houses, and their games, and the education of the boys and girls. Since Roman history has been omitted from the curriculum of the first year, we have tried to give the pupils a little background for the English composition by explaining briefly the terms "consul," "praetor," "republic," etc., which they find in their lessons.

The chief advantage of this extra hour is that it is a free period, within the teacher's discretion for "making straight the crooked ways." Many feel that the pressure of required work and grading robs us of our most valuable opportunity—to give the inspirational forces their true place and value in our work, and to develop those habits of thought and feeling that need encouragement and direction rather than compulsion.

Most pupils are ready to do their part, if their difficulties are met half way and their efforts end in successful achievement. This is a place where teacher and pupil meet on common ground for helpful progress—where the hard imperative "thou shalt" of the rest of the week is replaced by the gentler phrase "we will," and where, measurements and arbitrary standards laid aside, the object of the teacher and the pupil alike is to win an hour ahead in actual progress and understanding.

In speaking of the conference hour in the English department, one of the instructors says:

The teacher has made the pupils feel that this hour is likely to bring out something new and interesting and really valuable as well, so that they come into the English room in a pleasant spirit, and with an air of expectancy which is of itself an inspiration to teacher and pupils alike.



The pupils have been made to understand that what they can think is just as valuable and just as important as is the original thought of any one else, if they can learn to give it adequate and dignified expression. So in preparation for this hour the boys and girls have been thinking, instead of studying, as they usually understand study, and they come to this lesson with a new personal responsibility, and a more serious and earnest attitude toward the work. The creating of this personal interest has perhaps been the secret of the unusual success of the plan in all departments where it has been tried.

From the very beginning of the year I have found that this period is a time when the pupils express themselves most freely and unreservedly, and therefore most naturally. More than once during this period I have been reminded of Emerson's saying, "Conversation is the laboratory and workshop of the student." There seems to be a spirit of unconscious sympathy helping each pupil, and the wish to speak to the want of another mind assists a pupil in clearing his own mind. This general discussion of the lesson is interesting to the pupils because it suggests new ideas to them, and the practice in expressing their ideas improves their language.

After using the "conference-hour plan" for over a year with our first-year classes, the teachers feel that it is a useful and valuable adjunct to the work of the week. It affords a practical and efficient means of helping the first-year pupil to keep up to grade. It combines happily the class and individual methods of teaching. It serves the useful purpose of a general "clearing-house" period for review, drill, discussion of obscure principles, and for personal work with the individual pupil. The pupil understands that he can display his ignorance with hope of enlightenment and no fear of a poor grade for so doing. Hence he does not hesitate to do his part toward making this period a real conference hour. Finally, through intimate personal contact it establishes a feeling of mutual sympathy and helpfulness between teacher and pupil, and obviates largely the necessity of keeping the pupils after school to make up work.